EZ STREET

Blending Sus Colors

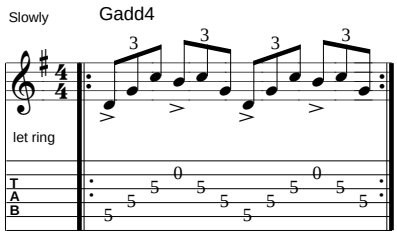
BY ANDY ELLIS

WHEN YOU HEAR SKILLED GUITARISTS COAX restless, haunting chords from their strings, chances are you're listening to suspended harmony. "Sus" chords aren't any harder to play than standard-issue major or minor chords, yet they sound much more intriguing. We began our investigation into suspended harmony with the sus4 chord ("Sus-Chord Mojo," Oct. '06), and then moved to the sus2 chord ("Sus2 Colors," Nov. '06). Here's a summary of what we've discovered so far: The basic sus chord is derived from the major triad, which is composed of the 1, 3, and 5 of a major scale built from the same root. When you replace the major triad's 3 with either the 2 or 4 of that major scale, you create a sus2 or sus4 voicing. The resulting 1-2-5 or 1-4-5 construction creates a compelling harmonic tension that's resolved when the 2 or 4 swings back to the 3.

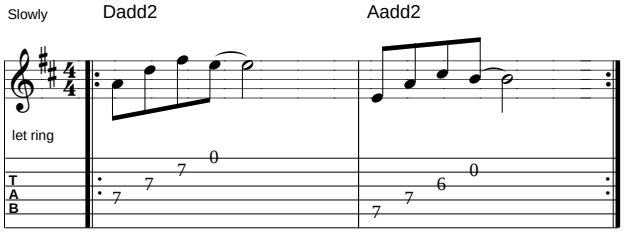
So far, we've been operating in an "either/or" mode—that is, we've had the 3 or the 2 or 4 in a given voicing. Shifting between the 3 and the suspended tone is what generates harmonic interest. You can, however, create a voicing that includes both the 3 and the 2 or 4. Because you're adding a color (rather than swapping it for the 3), these are called add2 or add4 chords. To hear these rich and prickly harmonies, play Examples 1 and 2, which feature Gadd4, Dadd2, and Aadd2 voicings.

For the best of all worlds, try integrating sus and add voicings, as in Ex. 3. Here, we explore the back-and-forth movement of sus chords before concluding with an edgy Dadd4,9. This final voicing offers everything: the 1, 3, and 5 of a D major triad (D, F♯, A), as well as its 2 (E)—played here an octave higher as an extension, which makes it a 9—and 4 (G). Don't freak out over the sixteenth-notes in bar 2, beat three. In harplike fashion, simply strum across the strings to get a rippling effect. Play that last open A softly, so it doesn't overwhelm the other sustaining notes.

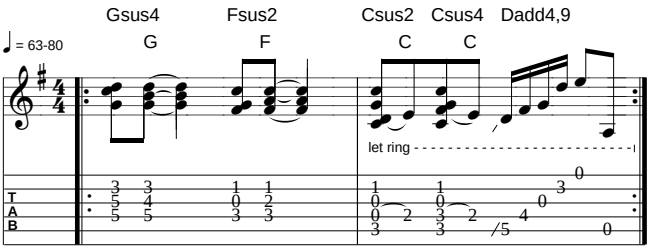
EX. 1



EX. 2



EX. 3



HUH?

When a chord contains a note that's more than an octave higher than the root, this chord tone is called an extension. Extensions are typically 9, 11, and 13, and can be lowered or raised (i.e., ♭9 or ♯11). If you subtract 7 from an extension, you'll see what the tone would be if it were in the chord's first octave. Thus 9 is a 2, 11 is a 4, and 13 is a 6, but in each case, the tone is raised an octave.

To make quick, clean chord changes, you must simultaneously fret all the required notes. If you sequentially fret them—even very fast—you'll be forever doomed to ragged, lagging chord shifts. Here's how to master "one-squeeze" changes. Visualize a chord shape, then lift your fingers away from the fretboard [left]. Next, slowly bring your fingers close to the strings, hovering over the target notes. Don't engage them yet, just get in position, making sure each fingertip is about the same distance from the strings [center]. Take your time. Once your digits are aligned, clamp down on the notes [right], using a single, swift motion. The secret is to avoid "dribbling" your fingers onto the strings. If you listen carefully—and don't attack the strings with your picking hand—you should hear a single "clink" as the strings snap against the frets. Repeat this process a dozen times for every grip you know. With practice, the time it takes to position your fretting fingers will drop to a split second, and your chord changes will sound crisp and immediate.

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